MODERN LOVE BY GEORGE MEREDITH

E. CAVAZZA

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For out of olde feldes as men seith
Cometh al this newe corn fro yeer to yere
And out of olde bokes in good feith
Cometh al this newe science that men lere

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MODERN LOVE

GEORGE MEREDITH

NOTE. It may be interesting to recall the date of the volume of Meredith's verse, which includes *Modern Love*. It was published in 1862, four years after William Morris' *Defence of Guenevere*, and one year later than Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translations from the *Early Italian Poets*, and Algernon C. Swinburne's *Queen Mother and Rosamond* — three names which are of morning stars of modern poetry singing together with voices harmonious, yet distinct, raining their influence upon the entire art of contemporary verse.

Only Fifty copies of this Large Paper Edition (Post 4to.) have been printed, ten of which are on Japan vellum, and forty on Van Gelder's hand-made paper. Each copy numbered, and the type distributed.

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MODERN LOVE BY GEORGE MEREDITH WITH FOREWORD BY E. CAVAZZA

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FOREWORD

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FOREWORD.

IN these times which rear temples of praise, adorned with intricate carven work of comment, to Robert Browning, George Meredith also may well claim here and there a wayside shrine. He has, indeed, a group of worshipers, who make up in fervor what they lack in number; and these celebrate the master in accents frequently borrowed from his own, chanting what a corypheus of theirs, Mr. Richard Le Gallienne, has cleverly called the Meredithyrambic. It is possible, however, that for the purpose of commending to the general reader one of Mr. Meredith's most significant and artistic works — the cycle of sonnets called *Modern Love* — there may not be needed the utterances of a ministrant deeply initiate, but rather the appreciations of one who, listening to the general choir of poets, hears in the voice of Meredith a powerful and unique tone.

It is chiefly due to the vast bulk and the difficult idiom of his novels that these have been so tardy of acceptance with the public; a measure of condescension toward the common uses of the English language ought not to be impossible to him; and there is much excuse for those persons who fail to find the time remunerative which is spent in seeking to follow the superabundant metaphor and suggestion of Mr. Meredith's work, continually taxing the intellect and the mental agility of the reader. Sometimes this author's recognition of the value of every fact delays him disproportionately upon trifles; he retouches the record of an impression, lingeringly, minutely, as if for his own pleasure of extreme analysis. But he is a genius and a giant, a far-searching and wholesome philosopher, one of the few fire-bringers of a tentative age. A reason why he has not shared the popular honors paid to Browning may be that their ideals — parallel in adoration of nature and its laws — diverge when they come to the question of the aim of human life. Meredith has for guide the love of law; Browning's faith

was in the law of love. In existence, with all its good and its evil, Browning beheld only a series of opportunities to learn the divine art of love which, to his mind, appeared the fulfilling, even when the apparent negation of every law. Meredith's goddess, on the contrary, is Reason. It cannot be denied that he sometimes celebrates her in a verbal anarchy, which recalls her worship in the days of the French revolution! To her he is vowed; for him, her hands alone divide the material of life between tragedy and comedy. Yet if we pursue the thought of the two poets, they are seen to unite in an impassioned belief in the final good and the unquenchable life of the soul.

Sentimentality that would close its eyes to uncomfortable facts, that dares not follow every least hint of nature to its final analysis, is the continual object of Mr. Meredith's solemn warning and bitter contempt. "More brain, more brain!" is his reiterate cry. He is profoundly impressed with the changes which are the systole

and diastole of the heart of nature and would have men unafraid, conformable:

> Faith in ourselves is faith in Time!
> And faith in nature keeps the force
> We have in us for daily use . . .
> Teach me to feel myself the tree
> And not the wither'd leaf.
> Fixed am I and await the dark to be.

It is with utterances like this, that he confirms the faith in ultimate things. Reason and nature form the principle of Meredith's philosophy as exemplified in his novels — of which there is no occasion here to speak in detail — and inspire also his *Modern Love*. This "great progressional poem," as Mr. Swinburne has called it, connected "by links of the finest and most studied workmanship," ought by virtue of its essential qualities to remain the perdurable example of its author's poetry. If time, even, that must load itself lightly as may be for its flight, should carry down to the future centuries only this of all Meredith's work, the author would not have cause to complain of misrepresentation. *Modern Love* is the compact expression of his theory; it is constructed with most careful art;

the sonnets which compose its sequence are like so many pictures by a master of the impressionist school. Precisely here may be noted a certain relation of Mr. Meredith's work to that of his contemporaries in other branches of art: He is not content to use only the means commonly allotted to his own department, but also imports forcibly material and methods from the neighboring fields. It is not at all certain, however, that the curse of art falls upon him who removes the landmarks! To speak now exclusively of the cycle of poems named *Modern Love*, it must first be admitted that although they have the value of sonnets and Mr. Swinburne himself, close craftsman of poetic form, has not withheld from them that title — they are, in fact, a half-hundred strophes composed of four quatrains, the first line rhymed with the fourth and the second and third together. But the spirit is entirely that of the sonnet: each strophe presenting a sole picture, with a certain reënforcement of its purpose in the final sestet. The subject of this tragedy in fifty brief scenes, largely imagined and forcibly

compressed, is the story of the wedded misery of two persons, whose natures were finely strung instruments for fate to play upon. The sentimentality of the feminine mind, that feeds on illusions and fears development as it fears death; the man's intellect that cannot trust nature, but will question and analyze; both of them recalcitrant against change, are the motives of this subdramatic study. The sonnets are so subtle and charged with secondary and often vague meanings, which are rather the stimulus to thought than its articulate expression, that a precise interpretation is hardly to be attempted. A few general outlines may be a sufficient guide to the reader.

The tragedy begins amid the silent solemnity of the night, when the wakeful husband is conscious of the "strange low sobs" of the wife at his side. His quivering hand near her head questions her mutely; her only reply is to silence her sobs. Imperfect demand and pathetic dumbness remain thus to baffle each other from first to last. The husband is aware that his wife loves

him no longer, that she is even wooed by another man. "Each suck'd a secret and each wore a mask," and he — for it is the husband's mind that is the stage for this drama — beholds her as a lurid star gleaming above the pit of infamy, and instantly hates himself for his anger. He cannot even despise his rival, for the rich light of her eyes is upon this lover and distinguishes him "leaving dark all else." The husband, by a fine scruple, is withheld from a kiss upon the brow of his wife, lest he meet there that other. For him, to whom she is bound by a vow become empty, she is now

> . . . . A phantom-woman in the Past.
> The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell!

He does not even know, that he might blame, the moment when she was lost to him, lost more irredeemably than if her fault were more flagrant.

> The misery is greater, as I live!
> To know her flesh so pure, so keen her sense
> That she does penance now for no offence
> Save against Love.

"It is no vulgar nature" that he has taken to wife; her fault and her remorse are alike intan-

gible. Her familiar beauty, "her shoulder in the glass," tempts him with the illusion that nothing is changed, that all remains as it was for him. While they sit by the fireside, "she laughing at a quiet joke," horrible reiterations of suffering and shame are in his mind as he watches her; and though he will not, even in thought, defame her, her adornments appear to him a meretricious appeal to the eye. It is not he alone who struggles, his doubts and her silence are equally unconquerable; without her, he feels himself more and more the clay which he strives to master. What was his crime?

. . . . In Love's deep woods
I dreamt of loyal Life: — the offence is there!

If he could have renounced the world and its facts, been content to dwell amid a fairy forest of illusions, she might still have been his. Here the poet makes a severe arraignment of women, whose timid conservatism and reliance on the senses he has noted in his prose: "Alas for us," he has said, "This, our awful baggage in the rear of humanity, these women . . . perpetually pulling us backward on the march."

The husband, looking to life's westward, perceives that his wife has killed his future, taken away the joy of the present, mixed even the past with illusion. Yet he will live his entire life, dares not cancel even one day of its course. Next, he looks upon a gold-haired lady, and learns what he later finds within himself, that without love it is possible to be jealous. It is a modern Othello, with no harmfulness against the life of the body, who — in the superb fourteenth sonnet — creeps to the bedside of his wife, to awaken her to the sight of love letters written by her, but to a new address.

The world still views them as happy host and hostess,

Dear guests, you now have seen Love's corpse-light shine!

Rustic bumpkins, dancing on the village green, inspired by beer, the born idiot "rubbing his hands before him like a fly," are objects of envy to this man of morbid heart and brain. A poignant moment for husband and wife is in the unconscious irony of a friend's demand for their blessing upon his approaching marriage. In the

twenty-second and twenty-third sonnets are beautiful expressions of the humility and the reserve of the poor woman, but pride remains the barrier between these two, and will not yield. He needs distraction; and the gold-haired lady is at hand. She is intelligent, charming. Love, indeed, has lost all its illusions; under the gold hair and the white forehead is apparent to this man the grin of the skull; yet he is grimly content to sit beside her

> And eat our pot of honey on the grave.

His philosophy is cynical:

> What are we first? First, animals; and next,
> Intelligences at a leap; on whom
> Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb,
> And all that draweth on the tomb for text.
> . . . . . .
> Lady, this is my Sonnet to your eyes.

He may say to her these evil things, for her golden head has wit in it — precisely enough to admire jejune philosophy, he is aware. To her also he repeats that

> . . . . While mind is mastering clay,
> Gross clay invades it.

When the poor wife seeks him with the hope

that speech may at last be possible between them, he responds with commonplaces, the topics of the day, an expected eruption of Vesuvius, news from Niagara. He freezes her tongue and sense, smothers the flame of her passion, checks the stream of her speech,

Niagara, or Vesuvius, is deferr'd.

Madam and the Lady meet and confide to him their mutual impressions, attacking with keen rapiers of praise each other's weak points. Afterward, he argues with the Lady that the old marriage-bond is past renewal, and she must let him love her in order to give light to his imagination, that otherwise must turn to clay or to stone. Yet the sight of the unloved wife, who touches the hand of that other man, is able to change the moon to a dancing spectre before his eyes. Then there is a mournful mocking semblance of reunion, and their love is killed by their kisses. By the sea, troubled and terrible, shall be its grave — a scene greatly portrayed in the forty-third sonnet.

We must go to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's verse,

or to that of the Italian poets of the *trecento* his masters, for a sonnet-opening like the first six lines of the forty-fourth sonnet,

> They say that Pity in Love's service dwells,

with its quaint, pure outline and sweet primitive color. Finally a chance meeting with her, and not alone, impels the husband to declare his faith in the wife. This inspired moment enlarges into a timeless experience of love's power, depicted in the sonnet of which Mr. Swinburne has declared: "A more perfect piece of writing no man alive has ever turned out:"

> We saw the swallows gathering in the skies.

Of this supreme hour, an exterior image — as in Rossetti's *Woodspurge* — remains startlingly impressed:

> And still I see across the twilight wave,
> The swan sail with her young beneath her wings.

Rapidly upon this respite follows the original arraignment of the feminine mind:

> Their sense is with their senses all mixed in,
> Destroyed by subtleties these women are!
> More brain, O Lord, more brain! or we shall mar
> Utterly this fair garden we might win.

For with the first words of honest speech of the man's confession, the jealous devotion of the wife bids him seek that Lady. Truly masculine is his judgment of this fantasy of her sentiment:

> I do adore the nobleness! despise
> The act!

She has left him; let the world guess at her motives, he knows them pure, even too subtly strained. He follows her and finds her near the sea; and she "though shadowlike and dry," returns with him. The midnight sees the end, as it saw the beginning of their tragedy.

> "Now kiss me, dear! it may be, now!" she said.
> Lethe had pass'd those lips, and he knew all.

In the closing sonnet are magnificently summed up the causes of the tragedy, of which the poet has not given us to hear the prologue. The fault of those two who suffered was in their lack of trust in themselves, in each other and in time; bewildered, confused, they tried by feeble expedients to stay the motion of their spirits. Clinging timorously to yesterday

> . . . . They fed not on the advancing hours,

they dared not obey "Necessity's instinct, true, though unsteady" (as Mr. Meredith has elsewhere written). They repeated the ancient error of Psyche, scanning the sleep of Love with a lamp, from which the burning drops of doubtfulness fall, sear his white shoulder and wake him to flight.

A grim lesson it is which this oversubtle and analytical end of the century may read in the "tragic hints" of Mr. Meredith's story of *Modern Love*.

E. CAVAZZA.

NOVEMBER, 1891.

MODERN LOVE

This is not meat
For little people or for fools.

BOOK OF THE SAGES.

I

BY this he knew she wept with waking eyes:
That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,
The strange low sobs that shook their common bed
Were called into her with a sharp surprise,
And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,
Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay
Stone-still, and the long darkness flow'd away
With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes
Her giant heart of Memory and Tears
Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat
Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet
Were moveless, looking thro' their dead black years,
By vain regret scrawl'd over the blank wall.
Like sculptured effigies they might be seen
Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;
Each wishing for the sword that severs all.

II

IT ended, and the morrow brought the task:
Her eyes were guilty gates that let him in
By shutting all too zealous for their sin:
Each suck'd a secret, and each wore a mask.
But, oh the bitter taste her beauty had!
He sicken'd as at breath of poison-flowers:
A languid humour stole among the hours,
And if their smiles encounter'd, he went mad,
And raged, deep inward, till the light was brown
Before his vision, and the world forgot,
Look'd wicked as some old dull murder spot.
A star with lurid beams, she seem'd to crown
The pit of infamy: and then again
He fainted on his vengefulness, and strove
To ape the magnanimity of love,
And smote himself, a shuddering heap of pain.

III

THIS was the woman; what now of the man?
But pass him! If he comes beneath our heel
He shall be crush'd until he cannot feel,
Or, being callous, haply till he can.
But he is nothing:—nothing? Only mark
The rich light striking from her unto him:
Ha! what a sense it is when her eyes swim
Across the man she singles, leaving dark
All else! Lord God, who mad'st the thing so fair,
See that I am drawn to her even now!
It cannot be such harm on her cool brow
To put a kiss? Yet if I meet him there!
But she is mine! Ah, no! I know too well
I claim a star whose light is overcast:
I claim a phantom-woman in the Past.
The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell!

IV

ALL other joys of life he strove to warm,
And magnify, and catch them to his lip:
But they had suffered shipwreck with the ship,
And gazed upon him sallow from the storm.
Or if Delusion came, 'twas but to show
The coming minute mock the one that went.
Cold as a mountain in its star-pitch'd tent
Stood high Philosophy, less friend than foe:
Whom self-caged Passion, from its prison-bars,
Is always watching with a wondering hate.
Not till the fire is dying in the grate,
Look we for any kinship with the stars.
Oh, wisdom never comes when it is gold,
And the great price we pay for it full worth.
We have it only when we are half earth.
Little avails that coinage to the old!

V

A message from her set his brain aflame.
A world of household matters fill'd her mind,
Wherein he saw hypocrisy design'd:
She treated him as something that is tame,
And but at other provocation bites.
Familiar was her shoulder in the glass
Through that dark rain: yet it may come to pass
That a changed eye finds such familiar sights,
More keenly tempting than new loveliness.
The 'What has been' a moment seem'd his own:
The splendours, mysteries, dearer because known,
Nor less divine: Love's inmost sacredness,
Call'd to him, "Come!"— In that restraining start,
Eyes nurtured to be look'd at, scarce could see
A wave of the great waves of Destiny
Convulsed at a check'd impulse of the heart.

VI

IT chanced his lips did meet her forehead cool.
She had no blush, but slanted down her eye.
Shamed nature, then, confesses love can die:
And most she punishes the tender fool
Who will believe what honours her the most!
Dead! is it dead? She has a pulse, and flow
Of tears, the price of blood-drops, as I know
For whom the midnight sobs around Love's ghost,
Since then I heard her, and so will sob on.
The love is here; it has but changed its aim.
O bitter barren woman! what's the name?
The name, the name, the new name thou hast won?
Behold me striking the world's coward stroke!
That will I not do, though the sting is dire.
—Beneath the surface this, while by the fire
They sat, she laughing at a quiet joke.

VII

SHE issues radiant from her dressing room,
Like one prepared to scale an upper sphere:
—By stirring up a lower, much I fear!
How deftly that oil'd barber lays his bloom!
That long-shank'd dapper Cupid with frisk'd curls,
Can make known women torturingly fair;
The gold-eyed serpent dwelling in rich hair,
Awakes beneath his magic whisks and twirls.
His art can take the eyes from out my head,
Until I see with eyes of other men;
While deeper knowledge crouches in its den,
And sends a spark up: — is it true we're wed?
Yea! filthiness of body is most vile,
But faithlessness of heart I do hold worse.
The former, it were not so great a curse
To read on the steel-mirror of her smile.

VIII

YET it was plain she struggled, and that salt
Of righteous feeling made her pitiful.
O abject worm, so queenly beautiful!
Where came the cleft between us? whose the fault?
My tears are on thee, that have rarely dropp'd
As balm for any bitter wound of mine:
My breast will open for thee at a sign!
But, no: we are two reed-pipes, coarsely stopp'd:
The God once filled them with his mellow breath;
And they were music till he flung them down,
Used! used! Hear now the discord-loving clown
Puff his gross spirit in them, worse than death!
I do not know myself without thee more:
In this unholy battle I grow base:
If the same soul be under the same face,
Speak, and a taste of that old time restore!

IX

HE felt the wild beast in him betweenwhiles
So masterfully rude, that he would grieve
To see the helpless delicate thing receive
His guardianship through certain dark defiles.
Had he not teeth to rend, and hunger too?
But still he spared her. Once: "Have you no fear?"
He said: 'twas dusk; she in his grasp; none near.
She laughed: "No, surely; am I not with you?"
And uttering that soft starry 'you,' she lean'd
Her gentle body near him, looking up;
And from her eyes, as from a poison-cup,
He drank until the flittering eyelids screen'd.
Devilish malignant witch! And oh, young beam
Of Heaven's circle-glory! Here thy shape
To squeeze like an intoxicating grape—
I might, and yet thou goest safe, supreme.

X

BUT where began the change; and what's my crime?
The wretch condemn'd, who has not been arraign'd,
Chafes at his sentence. Shall I, unsustain'd,
Drag on Love's nerveless body thro' all time?
I must have slept, since now I wake. Prepare,
You lovers, to know Love a thing of moods:
Not like hard life, of laws. In Love's deep woods
I dreamt of loyal Life:—the offence is there!
Love's jealous woods about the sun are curl'd;
At least, the sun far brighter there did beam.—
My crime is that, the puppet of a dream,
I plotted to be worthy of the world.
Oh, had I with my darling help'd to mince
The facts of life, you still had seen me go
With hindward feather and with forward toe,
Her much-adored delightful Fairy Prince!

XI

OUT in the yellow meadows where the bee
Hums by us with the honey of the Spring,
And showers of sweet notes from the larks on wing,
Are dropping like a noon-dew wander we.
Or is it now? or was it then? for now,
As then, the larks from running rings send showers:
The golden foot of May is on the flowers,
And friendly shadows dance upon her brow.
What's this, when Nature swears there is no change
To challenge eyesight? Now, as then, the grace
Of Heaven seems holding Earth in its embrace.
Nor eyes, nor heart, has she to feel it strange?
Look, woman, in the west. There wilt thou see
An amber cradle near the sun's decline:
Within it, featured even in death divine,
Is lying a dead infant, slain by thee!

XII

NOT solely that the Future she destroys,
And the fair life which in the distance lies
For all men, beckoning out from dim rich skies:
Nor that the passing hour's supporting joys
Have lost the keen-edged flavour, which begat
Distinction in old time, and still should breed
Sweet Memory, and Hope,—Earth's modest seed,
And Heaven's high-prompting: not that the world is flat
Since that soft-luring creature I embraced,
Among the children of Illusion went:
Methinks with all this loss I were content,
If the mad Past, on which my foot is based,
Were firm, or might be blotted: but the whole
Of life is mixed: the mocking Past must stay:
And if I drink oblivion of a day,
So shorten I the stature of my soul.

XIII

"I play for Seasons; not Eternities!"
Says Nature, laughing on her way. "So must
All those whose stake is nothing more than dust!"
And lo, she wins, and of her harmonies
She is full sure! Upon her dying rose
She drops a look of fondness, and goes by,
Scarce any retrospection in her eye;
For she the laws of growth most deeply knows,
Whose hands bear, here, a seed-bag; there, an urn.
Pledged she herself to aught, 'twould mark her end!
This lesson of our only visible friend,
Can we not teach our foolish hearts to learn?
Yes! yes! — but oh, our human rose is fair
Surpassingly! Lose calmly Love's great bliss,
When the renew'd forever of a kiss
Sounds thro' the listless hurricane of hair!

XIV

WHAT soul would bargain for a cure that brings
Contempt the nobler agony to kill?
Rather let me bear on the bitter ill,
And strike this rusty bosom with new stings!
It seems there is another veering fit,
Since on a gold-hair'd lady's eyeballs pure,
I look'd with little prospect of a cure,
The while her mouth's red bow loosed shafts of wit.
Just Heaven! can it be true that jealousy
Has deck'd the woman thus? and does her head
Whirl giddily for what she forfeited?
Madam! you teach me many things that be.
I open an old book, and there I find
That 'Women still may love whom they deceive.'
Such love I prize not, Madam: by your leave,
The game you play at is not to my mind.

XV

I think she sleeps: it must be sleep, when low
Hangs that abandon'd arm towards the floor:
The head turn'd with it. Now make fast the door.
Sleep on: it is your husband, not your foe!
The Poet's black stage-lion of wrong'd love,
Frights not our modern dames:—well, if he did!
Now will I pour new light upon that lid,
Full-sloping like the breasts beneath. "Sweet dove,
"Your sleep is pure. Nay, pardon: I disturb.
"I do not? well!" Her waking infant stare
Grows woman to the burden my hands bear:
Her own handwriting to me when no curb
Was left on Passion's tongue. She trembles thro';
A woman's tremble—the whole instrument:—
I show another letter lately sent.
The words are very like: the name is new.

XVI

IN our old shipwreck'd days there was an hour,
When in the firelight steadily aglow,
Join'd slackly, we beheld the chasm grow
Among the clicking coals. Our library-bower
That eve was left to us: and hush'd we sat
As lovers to whom Time is whispering.
From sudden-open'd doors we heard them sing:
The nodding elders mix'd good wine with chat.
Well knew we that Life's greatest treasure lay
With us, and of it was our talk. "Ah, yes!
"Love dies!" I said: I never thought it less.
She yearn'd to me that sentence to unsay.
Then when the fire domed blackening, I found
Her cheek was salt against my kiss, and swift
Up the sharp scale of sobs her breast did lift:—
Now am I haunted by that taste! that sound!

XVII

AT dinner she is hostess, I am host.
Went the feast ever cheerfuller? She keeps
The Topic over intellectual deeps
In buoyancy afloat. They see no ghost.
With sparkling surface-eyes we ply the ball:
It is in truth a most contagious game;
HIDING THE SKELETON shall be its name.
Such play as this the devils might appal!
But here's the greater wonder; in that we,
Enamour'd of our acting and our wits,
Admire each other like true hypocrites.
Warm-lighted glances, Love's Ephemeræ,
Shoot gaily o'er the dishes and the wine.
We waken envy of our happy lot.
Fast, sweet, and golden, shows our marriage-knot.
Dear guests, you now have seen Love's corpse-light shine!

XVIII

HERE Jack and Tom are pair'd with Moll and Meg.
Curved open to the river-reach is seen
A country merry-making on the green.
Fair space for signal shakings of the leg.
That little screwy fiddler from his booth,
Whence flows one nut-brown stream, commands the joints
Of all who caper here at various points.
I have known rustic revels in my youth:
The May-fly pleasures of a mind at ease.
An early goddess was a country lass:
A charm'd Amphion-oak she tripped the grass.
What life was that I lived? The life of these?
God keep them happy! Nature they are near.
They must, I think, be wiser than I am:
They have the secret of the bull and lamb.
'Tis true that when we trace its source, 'tis beer.

XIX

NO state is enviable. To the luck alone
Of some few favour'd men I would put claim.
I bleed, but she who wounds I will not blame.
Have I not felt her heart as 'twere my own,
Beat thro' me? could I hurt her? Heaven and Hell!
But I could hurt her cruelly! Can I let
My Love's old time-piece to another set,
Swear it can't stop, and must for ever swell?
Sure, that's one way Love drifts into the mart
Where goat-legg'd buyers throng. I see not plain:—
My meaning is, it must not be again.
Great God! the maddest gambler throws his heart.
If any state be enviable on earth,
'Tis yon born idiot's, who, as days go by,
Still rubs his hands before him like a fly,
In a queer sort of meditative mirth.

XX

I am not of those miserable males
Who sniff at vice, and, daring not to snap,
Do therefore hope for Heaven. I take the hap
Of all my deeds. The wind that fills my sails,
Propels; but I am helmsman. Am I wreck'd,
I know the devil has sufficient weight
To bear: I lay it not on him, or fate.
Besides, he's damn'd. That man I do suspect
A coward, who would burden the poor deuce
With what ensues from his own slipperiness.
I have just found a wanton-scented tress
In an old desk, dusty for lack of use.
Of days and nights it is demonstrative,
That like a blasted star gleam luridly.
If for that time I must ask charity,
Have I not any charity to give?

XXI

WE three are on the cedar-shadow'd lawn;
My friend being third. He who at love once laugh'd,
Is in the weak rib by a fatal shaft
Struck through and tells his passion's bashful dawn,
And radiant culmination, glorious crown,
When 'this' she said: went 'thus:' most wondrous she!
Our eyes grow white, encountering; that we are three,
Forgetful; then together we look down.
But he demands our blessing; is convinced
That words of wedded lovers must bring good.
We question: if we dare! or if we should!
And pat him, with light laugh. We have not winced.
Next, she has fallen. Fainting points the sign
To happy things in wedlock. When she wakes
She looks the star that thro' the cedar shakes:
Her lost moist hand clings mortally to mine.

XXII

WHAT may this woman labour to confess?
There is about her mouth a nervous twitch.
'Tis something to be told, or hidden: — which?
I get a glimpse of Hell in this mild guess.
She has desires of touch, as if to feel
That all the household things are things she knew.
She stops before the glass. What does she view?
A face that seems the latest to reveal!
For she turns from it hastily, and toss'd
Irresolute, steals shadow-like to where
I stand; and wavering pale before me there,
Her tears fall still as oak-leaves after frost.
She will not speak. I will not ask. We are
League-sunder'd by the silent gulf between.
You burly lovers on the village green,
Yours is a lower, but a happier star!

XXIII

'TIS Christmas weather, and a country house
Receives us: rooms are full: we can but get
An attic-crib. Such lovers will not fret
At that, it is half-said. The great carouse
Knocks hard upon the midnight's hollow door.
But when I knock at hers, I see the pit.
Why did I come here in that dullard fit?
I enter, and lie couch'd upon the floor.
Passing, I caught the coverlid's quick beat: —
Come, Shame, burn to my soul! and Pride, and Pain —
Foul demons that have tortured me, sustain!
Out in the freezing darkness the lambs bleat.
The small bird stiffens in the low starlight.
I know not how, but, shuddering as I slept,
I dream'd a banish'd Angel to me crept:
My feet were nourish'd on her breasts all night.

XXIV

THE misery is greater, as I live!
To know her flesh so pure, so keen her sense,
That she does penance now for no offence,
Save against Love. The less can I forgive!
The less can I forgive, though I adore
That cruel lovely pallor which surrounds
Her footsteps; and the low vibrating sounds
That come on me, as from a magic shore.
Low are they, but most subtle to find out
The shrinking soul. Madam, 'tis understood
When women play upon their womanhood.
It means, a Season gone. And yet I doubt
But I am duped. That nun-like look waylays
My fancy. Oh! I do but wait a sign!
Pluck out the eyes of Pride! thy mouth to mine!
Never! though I die thirsting. Go thy ways!

XXV

YOU like not that French novel? Tell me why.
You think it most unnatural. Let us see.
The actors are, it seems, the usual three:
Husband, and wife, and lover. She — but fie!
In England we'll not hear of it. Edmond,
The lover, her devout chagrin doth share;
Blanc-mange and absinthe are his penitent fare,
Till his pale aspect makes her overfond:
So, to preclude fresh sin, he tries rosbif.
Meantime the husband is no more abused:
Auguste forgives her ere the tear is used.
Then hangeth all on one tremendous If:—
If she will choose between them! She does choose;
And takes her husband like a proper wife.
Unnatural? My dear, these things are life:
And life, they say, is worthy of the Muse.

XXVI

LOVE ere he bleeds, an eagle in high skies,
Has earth beneath his wings: from redden'd eve
He views the rosy dawn. In vain they weave
The fatal web below while far he flies.
But when the arrow strikes him, there's a change.
He moves but in the track of his spent pain,
Whose red drops are the links of a harsh chain,
Binding him to the ground with narrow range.
A subtle serpent then has Love become.
I had the eagle in my bosom erst.
Henceforward with the serpent I am curs'd.
I can interpret where the mouth is dumb.
Speak, and I see the side-lie of a truth.
Perchance my heart may pardon you this deed:
But be no coward: — you that made Love bleed,
You must bear all the venom of his tooth!

XXVII

DISTRACTION is the panacea, Sir!
I hear my Oracle of Medicine say.
Doctor! that same specific yesterday
I tried, and the result will not deter
A second trial. Is the devil's line
Of golden hair, or raven black, composed?
And does a cheek, like any sea-shell rosed,
Or fair as widow'd Heaven, seem most divine?
No matter, so I taste forgetfulness.
And if the devil snare me, body and mind,
Here gratefully I score: — he seemëd kind,
When not a soul would comfort my distress!
O sweet new world in which I rise new made!
O Lady, once I gave love: now I take!
Lady, I must be flatter'd. Shouldst thou wake
The passion of a demon, be not afraid.

XXVIII

I must be flatter'd. The imperious
Desire speaks out. Lady, I am content
To play with you the game of Sentiment,
And with you enter on paths perilous:
But if across your beauty I throw light,
To make it threefold, it must be all mine.
First secret; then avow'd. For I must shine
Envied, — I, lessen'd in my proper sight!
Be watchful of your beauty, Lady dear!
How much hangs on that lamp you cannot tell.
Most earnestly I pray you, tend it well:
And men shall see me like the burning sphere:
And men shall mark you eyeing me, and groan
To be the God of such a grand sunflower!
I feel the promptings of Satanic power,
While you do homage unto me alone.

XXIX

AM I failing? for no longer can I cast
A glory round about this head of gold.
Glory she wears, but springing from the mould:
Not like the consecration of the Past!
Is my soul beggar'd? Something more than earth
I cry for still: I cannot be at peace
In having Love upon a mortal lease.
I cannot take the woman at her worth!
Where is the ancient wealth wherewith I clothed
Our human nakedness, and could endow
With spiritual splendour a white brow
That else had grinn'd at me the fact I loath'd?
A kiss is but a kiss now! and no wave
Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea.
But, as you will! we'll sit contentedly,
And eat our pot of honey on the grave.

XXX

WHAT are we first? First, animals; and next,
Intelligences at a leap; on whom
Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb,
And all that draweth on the tomb for text.
Into this state comes Love, the crowning sun:
Beneath whose light the shadow loses form.
We are the lords of life, and life is warm.
Intelligence and instinct now are one.
But Nature says: 'My children most they seem
When they least know me: therefore I decree
That they shall suffer.' Swift doth young Love flee:
And we stand waken'd, shivering from our dream.
Then if we study Nature we are wise.
Thus do the few who live but with the day.
The scientific animals are they. —
Lady, this is my Sonnet to your eyes.

XXXI

THIS golden head has wit in it. I live
Again, and a far higher life, near her.
Some women like a young philosopher;
Perchance because he is diminutive.
For woman's manly god must not exceed
Proportions of the natural nursing size.
Great poets and great sages draw no prize
With women: but the little lap-dog breed,
Who can be hugg'd, or on a mantel-piece
Perch'd up for adoration, these obtain
Her homage. And of this we men are vain?
Of this! 'Tis order'd for the world's increase!
Small flattery! Yet she has that rare gift
To beauty, Common Sense. I am approved.
It is not half so nice as being loved,
And yet I do prefer it. What's my drift?

XXXII

FULL faith I have she holds that rarest gift
To beauty, Common Sense. To see her lie
With her fair visage an inverted sky
Bloom-cover'd, while the underlids uplift,
Would almost wreck the faith; but when her mouth
(Can it kiss sweetly? sweetly!) would address
The inner me that thirsts for her no less,
And has so long been languishing in drouth,
I feel that I am match'd: that I am man!
One restless corner of my heart, or head,
That holds a dying something never dead,
Still frets, though Nature giveth all she can.
It means, that woman is not, I opine,
Her sex's antidote. Who seeks the asp
For serpents' bites? 'Twould calm me could I clasp
Shrieking Bacchantes with their souls of wine!

XXXIII

'IN Paris, at the Louvre, there have I seen
The sumptuously-feather'd angel pierce
Prone Lucifer, descending. Look'd he fierce,
Showing the fight a fair one? Too serene!
The young Pharsalians did not disarray
Less willingly their locks of floating silk:
That suckling mouth of his, upon the milk
Of stars might still be feasting through the fray.
Oh, Raphael! when men the Fiend do fight,
They conquer not upon such easy terms.
Half serpent in the struggle grow these worms.
And does he grow half human, all is right.'
This to my Lady in a distant spot,
Upon the theme: '*While mind is mastering clay,*
Gross clay invades it.' If the spy you play,
My wife, read this! Strange love-talk, is it not?

XXXIV

MADAM would speak with me. So, now it comes:
The Deluge, or else Fire! She's well; she thanks
My husbandship. Our chain through silence clanks.
Time leers between us, twiddling his thumbs.
Am I quite well? Most excellent in health!
The journals, too, I diligently peruse.
Vesuvius is expected to give news:
Niagara is no noisier. By stealth
Our eyes dart scrutinizing snakes. She's glad
I'm happy, says her quivering under-lip.
"And are not you?" "How can I be?" "Take ship!
"For happiness is somewhere to be had."
"Nowhere for me!" Her voice is barely heard.
I am not melted, and make no pretence.
With truisms I freeze her, tongue and sense.
Niagara, or Vesuvius, is deferr'd.

XXXV

IT is no vulgar nature I have wived.
Secretive, sensitive, she takes a wound
Deep to her soul, as if the sense had swoon'd,
And not a thought of vengeance had survived.
No confidences has she: but relief
Must come to one whose suffering is acute.
O have a care of natures that are mute!
They punish you in acts: their steps are brief.
What is she doing? What does she demand
From Providence, or me? She is not one
Long to endure this torpidly, and shun
The drugs that crowd about a woman's hand.
At Forfeits during snow we play'd, and I
Must kiss her. "Well perform'd!" I said: then she:
"'Tis hardly worth the money, you agree?"
Save her? What for? To act this wedded lie!

XXXVI

MY Lady unto Madam makes her bow.
The charm of women is, that even while
You're probed by them for tears, you yet may smile,
Nay, laugh outright, as I have done just now.
The interview was gracious: they anoint
(To me aside) each other with fine praise:
Discriminating compliments they raise,
That hit with wondrous aim on the weak point.
My Lady's nose of nature might complain.
It is not fashion'd aptly to express
Her character of large-brow'd stedfastness.
But Madam says: Thereof she may be vain!
Now, Madam's faulty feature is a glazed
And inaccessible eye, that has soft fires,
Wide gates, at love-time only. This admires
My Lady. At the two I stand amazed.

XXXVII

ALONG the garden terrace, under which
A purple valley (lighted at its edge
By smoky torch-flame on the long cloud-ledge
Whereunder dropp'd the chariot), glimmers rich,
A quiet company we pace, and wait
The dinner-bell in pre-digestive calm.
So sweet up violet banks the Southern balm
Breathes round, we care not if the bell be late :
Tho' here and there gray seniors question Time
In irritable coughings. With slow foot
The low, rosed moon, the face of Music mute,
Begins among her silent bars to climb.
As in and out, in silvery dusk, we thread,
I hear the laugh of Madam, and discern
My Lady's heel before me at each turn.
Our Tragedy, is it alive or dead ?

XXXVIII

GIVE to imagination some pure light
In human form to fix it, or you shame
The devils with that hideous human game: —
Imagination urging appetite!
Thus fallen have earth's greatest Gogmagogs,
Who dazzle us, whom we cannot revere.
Imagination is the charioteer
That, in default of better, drives the hogs.
So, therefore, my dear Lady, let me love!
My soul is arrow'd to the light in you.
You know me that I never can renew
The bond that woman broke: what would you have?
'Tis Love, or Vileness! not a choice between,
Save petrifaction! What does Pity here?
She kill'd a thing, and now it's dead, 'tis dear.
O, when you counsel me, think what you mean!

XXXIX

SHE yields : my Lady in her noblest mood
Has yielded : she, my golden-crownëd rose !
The bride of every sense ! more sweet than those
Who breathe the violet breath of maidenhood.
O visage of still music in the sky !
Soft moon ! I feel thy song, my fairest friend !
True harmony within can apprehend
Dumb harmony without. And hark ! 'tis nigh !
Belief has struck the note of sound : a gleam
Of living silver shows me where she shook
Her long white fingers down the shadowy brook,
That sings her song, half waking, half in dream.
What two come here to mar this heavenly tune ?
A man is one : the woman bears my name,
And honour. Their hands touch ! Am I still tame ?
God, what a dancing spectre seems the moon !

XL

I bade my Lady think what she might mean.
Know I my meaning, *I*? Can I love one,
And yet be jealous of another? None
Commit such folly. Terrible Love, I ween,
Has might, even dead, half sighing to upheave
The lightless seas of selfishness amain:
Seas that in a man's heart have no rain
To fall and still them. Peace can I achieve
By turning to this fountain-source of woe,
This woman, who's to Love as fire to wood?
She breath'd the violet breath of maidenhood
Against my kisses once! but I say, No!
The thing is mock'd at! Helplessly afloat,
I know not what I do, whereto I strive.
The dread that my old love may be alive,
Has seiz'd my nursling new love by the throat.

XLI

HOW many a thing which we cast to the ground,
When others pick it up becomes a gem!
We grasp at all the wealth it is to them;
And by reflected light its worth is found.
Yet for us still 'tis nothing! and that zeal
Of false appreciation quickly fades.
This truth is little known to human shades,
How rare from their own instinct 'tis to feel!
They waste the soul with spurious desire,
That is not the ripe flame upon the bough:
We two have taken up a lifeless vow
To rob a living passion: dust for fire!
Madam is grave, and eyes the clock that tells
Approaching midnight. We have struck despair
Into two hearts. O, look we like a pair
Who for fresh nuptials joyfully yield all else?

XLII

I am to follow her. There is much grace
In women when thus bent on martyrdom.
They think that dignity of soul may come,
Perchance, with dignity of body. Base!
But I was taken by that air of cold
And statuesque sedateness, when she said,
"I'm going;" lit the taper, bow'd her head,
And went, as with the stride of Pallas bold.
Fleshly indifference horrible! The hands
Of Time now signal: O, she's safe from me!
Within those secret walls what do I see?
Where first she set the taper down she stands:
Not Pallas: Hebe shamed! Thoughts black as death,
Like a stirr'd pool in sunshine break. Her wrists
I catch: she faltering, as she half resists,
"You love . . . ? love . . . ? love . . . ?" all in an indrawn breath.

XLIII

MARK where the pressing wind shoots javelin-like,
Its skeleton shadow on the broad-back'd wave!
Here is a fitting spot to dig Love's grave;
Here where the ponderous breakers plunge and strike,
And dart their hissing tongues high up the sand:
In hearing of the ocean, and in sight
Of those ribb'd wind-streaks running into white.
If I the death of Love had deeply plann'd,
I never could have made it half so sure,
As by the unbless'd kisses which upbraid
The full-waked sense; or, failing that, degrade!
T is morning: but no morning can restore
What we have forfeited. I see no sin:
'The wrong is mix'd. In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
We are betray'd by what is false within.

XLIV

THEY say that Pity in Love's service dwells,
A porter at the rosy temple's gate.
I miss'd him going: but it is my fate
To come upon him now beside his wells;
Whereby I know that I Love's temple leave,
And that the purple doors have closed behind.
Poor soul! if in those early days unkind,
Thy power to sting had been but power to grieve,
We now might with an equal spirit meet,
And not be match'd like innocence and vice.
She for the Temple's worship has paid price,
And takes the coin of Pity as a cheat.
She sees thro' simulation to the bone:
What's best in her impels her to the worst.
Never, she cries, shall Pity soothe Love's thirst,
Or foul hypocrisy for truth atone!

XLV

IT is the season of the sweet wild rose,
My Lady's emblem in the heart of me!
So golden-crownëd shines she gloriously,
And with that softest dream of blood she glows:
Mild as an evening Heaven round Hesper bright!
I pluck the flower, and smell it, and revive
The time when in her eyes I stood alive.
I seem to look upon it out of Night.
Here's Madam, stepping hastily. Her whims
Bid her demand the flower, which I let drop.
As I proceed, I feel her sharply stop,
And crush it under heel with trembling limbs.
She joins me in a cat-like way, and talks
Of company, and even condescends
To utter laughing scandal of old friends.
These are the summer days, and these our walks.

XLVI

AT last we parley: we so strangely dumb
In such a close communion! It befell
About the sounding of the Matin-bell,
And lo! her place was vacant, and the hum
Of loneliness was round me. Then I rose,
And my disorder'd brain did guide my foot
To that old wood where our first love-salute
Was interchanged: the source of many throes!
There did I see her, not alone. I moved
Towards her, and made proffer of my arm.
She took it simply, with no rude alarm;
And that disturbing shadow pass'd reproved.
I felt the pain'd speech coming, and declared
My firm belief in her, ere she could speak.
A ghastly morning came into her cheek,
While with a widening soul on me she stared.

XLVII

WE saw the swallows gathering in the sky,
And in the osier-isle we heard their noise.
We had not to look back on summer joys,
Or forward to a summer of bright dye.
But in the largeness of the evening earth
Our spirits grew as we went side by side.
The hour became her husband, and my bride.
Love that had robb'd us so, thus bless'd our dearth!
The pilgrims of the year wax'd very loud
In multitudinous chatterings, as the flood
Full brown came from the west, and like pale blood
Expanded to the upper crimson cloud.
Love that had robb'd us of immortal things,
This little moment mercifully gave,
And still I see across the twilight wave,
The swan sail with her young beneath her wings.

XLVIII

THEIR sense is with their senses all mix'd in.
Destroy'd by subtleties these women are!
More brain, O Lord, more brain! or we shall mar
Utterly this fair garden we might win.
Behold! I looked for peace, and thought it near.
Our inmost hearts had open'd, each to each.
We drank the pure daylight of honest speech.
Alas! that was the fatal draught, I fear.
For when of my lost Lady came the word,
This woman, O this agony of flesh!
Jealous devotion bade her break the mesh,
That I might seek that other like a bird.
I do adore the nobleness! despise
The act! She has gone forth, I know not where.
Will the hard world my sentience of her share?
I feel the truth; so let the world surmise.

XLIX

HE found her by the ocean's moaning verge,
Nor any wicked change in her discern'd ;
And she believed his old love had return'd,
Which was her exultation, and her scourge.
She took his hand, and walked with him, and seem'd
The wife he sought, tho' shadowlike and dry.
She had one terror, lest her heart should sigh,
And tell her loudly she no longer dream'd.
She dared not say, "This is my breast: look in."
But there's a strength to help the desperate weak.
That night he learnt how silence best can speak
The awful things when Pity pleads for Sin.
About the middle of the night her call
Was heard, and he came wondering to the bed.
"Now kiss me, dear! it may be, now!" she said.
Lethe had pass'd those lips, and he knew all.

L

THUS piteously Love closed what he begat:
The union of this ever-diverse pair!
These two were rapid falcons in a snare,
Condemn'd to do the flitting of the bat.
Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,
They wander'd once; clear as the dew on flowers:
But they fed not on the advancing hours:
Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
Then each applied to each that fatal knife,
Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.
Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
When hot for certainties in this our life! —
In tragic hints here see what evermore
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!

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